

Steps to Success With Your WMS Implementation

The success or failure of a WMS implementation can dramatically affect a company's bottom line margin and market share.

How can you make sure your WMS implementation is one of the successful ones? Obviously, selecting the right software product and implementation partner is key and the first step, but there is more.

Many elements make up a WMS implementation and some of these occur simultaneously throughout the implementation. Success is determined on how well a company manages the entire implementation process. In fact, a WMS can not only be successful, it can exceed expectations by following a few simple, yet important steps.

Let Operations Own the Project

You can't, and shouldn't, rely on your software vendor or implementer to own your WMS project. They will play a key and vital role as both plan developer and implementer. But only you know the ins and outs of your operation better than anyone and are its most important advocate. By taking final ownership of the project, you will ensure that your company's goals and objectives are always met.

Drilling down further into the organization, the operations side of your company must be the internal owners of the project, since your new WMS will run the overall distribution operations of your business. Operations staff should be directly involved in how the system will function and what processes and procedures remain in place.

The IT side of your business, then, should plan key support roles in the overall implementation. They should be used as advisors for hardware configuration and setup. This group will most likely have responsibility for integrating the new WMS with your host system and other internal systems.

You should also plan to have your most knowledgeable employees (not just department managers) heavily involved in system setup and testing.

Get Commitment from All Levels

A project of this size and scope must have support from all levels of the company. Executive buy-in and sponsorship are key to securing the resources (personnel and finances) to successfully complete a project of this magnitude.

The project team usually includes the project manager and the key users of the system. By giving them ownership of the project, you help to make sure they put forth their best effort.

However, one of the most important commitments is that of your end users—and you must get their commitment early in the process. By involving the users right from the start, you give them a chance to suggest options and processes. Early involvement helps the users feel they have a voice in this change and goes a long way toward their accepting the system.

Build a Trusting Relationship with Your Vendor

When choosing a vendor to partner with you for your WMS implementation, look for a team with experience. You also need to select a partner with whom you have a high comfort level. Trust is also an

essential element here. With trust, open dialogue is encouraged, leading to faster, sounder decisions and a more successful project.

Set Clear, Correct Expectations

In order to minimize the effect of the change, state your expectations clearly and early and repeat them often. With clearly stated expectations, you are more likely to get buy-in from every single person affected by the implementation—from executives to floor personnel, from vendors to customers.

However, realize that some resistance is inherent in a project of this scope and magnitude. The best method to manage any hesitancy involves creating a change management plan that encompasses communication plans, readiness assessments, contingency plans, coaching plans and guidelines for building sponsorship. Be sure that you communicate the appropriate messages to the appropriate stakeholder groups clearly and frequently.

Utilize a Proven Methodology

An experienced implementer will know what works and, as importantly, what doesn't work in a WMS implementation. Trust your implementer to develop a methodology with proven processes and procedures.

The methodology should comprise clearly defined roles and responsibilities, an organized budget and a project timeline. In addition, every phase of the project should be signed off by the key team member on both the client and implementer side. By assigning ownership to each party, you ensure that each phase is as successful as possible.

Build a “Solution” Design

This phase is the most important one of your project. You are not implementing a system. You are not implementing a material flow. And you're not only implementing a facility design. You are implementing a solution. No one thing is more important in this process than the other. The design should consider all these facets to produce the best possible solution for your business. By using the strengths of each of these to get the design right you will set the stage for a successful implementation.

You Can't Test Enough

Test. Test. Test. You can't overdo it. Full integration testing and user acceptance testing are equally important. You must make sure your system works end-to-end with all other systems. Perform volume testing to see if the system can handle the daily peak volumes of the operations. And test your users. They must accept how the system works and use it correctly.

However, don't fall prey to thinking that if you are using a base package without modifications, testing is not needed. There is not a single implementation that doesn't require thorough testing of every component.

In addition, be sure that when problems are encountered, you keep testing until the issue is resolved. Even so, some issues will arise after go-live. Don't fret over these. Minor issues are to be expected in any implementation. Having the proper support team in place to react and correct these issues quickly is essential.

Training Makes it Work

Ultimately, your system performance rests on how well your users use the system. Yet, most implementations fail right here.

A “train the trainer” approach is an excellent method. It involves training key personnel as “key users” who, in turn, train other employees. These key users are on hand long after the vendor and integrator has gone home, and they will be capable of answering questions that crop up as users continue to grow familiar with the system.

Also, it helps to realize that adults learn best by repetition. Your users should practice with several different scenarios and repeat their exercises several times before, during and after implementation.

You'll also want to customize your training program so that employees learn the system as it relates to their specific job functions.

Looking Good

A WMS implementation involves considerable time, a financial investment, continued communications, and quick resolution of problems that arise along the way. But, more importantly, it brings greater efficiencies—and likely greater profits—to your organization. If you can follow these keys steps, you can ensure a successful implementation for your company too.

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